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SUBJECT: Tunisia: Politicization of the Military

MESA M# 86-20016

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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D. C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

31 January 1986

Tunisia: Politicization of the Military
Summary

The Tunisian military's heritage as an apolitical institution is being eroded. There is increasing concern and interest among Tunisian soldiers about domestic political issues. [redacted] growing morale problems in the military due to budget stringencies, high-level personnel changes, and foreign and domestic political developments. These concerns reflect in part a broader public disenchantment with the government and malaise due to economic decline and festering social problems. Recent coup rumors exaggerated the willingness of officers to intervene at this time; nevertheless, the economic and political deterioration of Tunisia is breeding discontent within the ranks. A significant loss of legitimacy by the faltering Bourguiba government or its successor could embolden officers to take power. The events most likely to provoke intervention include government inability to control widespread public disorder or the paralysis of the regime before or after 85-year old President Bourguiba's demise. [redacted]

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Tunisia is unusual in the Arab world because its armed forces have not played a significant political role either before or after independence in 1957. Several factors account for the military's secondary role in Tunisian affairs. Bourguiba, the country's founding father and dominant personality for decades, has worked hard to keep the military out of politics. His popularity is in part attributable to the country's success in obtaining independence from France without force of arms. In addition, economic development has been fairly strong since independence, and social and demographic pressures on the largely homogeneous population have

This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] the Maghreb Branch, Arab-Israeli Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Information as of 29 January 1986 was used in its preparation. Questions and comments should be directed to Chief, Arab-Israeli Division [redacted]

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been minimal until recent years. On the external front, Tunisia has had few serious disagreements with its larger and militarily more powerful neighbors Libya and Algeria, thus mitigating the need for a big, costly military establishment. Tunisia also has enjoyed fairly close military ties with France and US because of the country's pro-Western orientation. []

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Governments in Tunis consequently have not devoted significant financial resources to the organization of large military forces. The country's inventory of weapons is extremely modest in comparison to its neighbors. Government financial parsimony toward the military also has stunted the growth of a professional officer corps. []

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Into the Fray

Since the late 1970s, the military has become a more visible plays in Tunisian politics. The impetus for involvement, however, has come from the government, rather than from within the officer corps. Demonstrations and violence in 1978 as the result of a faltering economy and differences between government and labor compelled Bourguiba to call upon security forces to restore order. More widespread and serious disturbances in early 1984, sparked by a rise in bread prices, were not quashed until combat units were called in. []

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The military role during the 1984 "bread riots" led senior officers to complain about their newly assigned role and the dangers in the government asking troops to act against the citizenry. Senior officers were concerned that soldiers might hesitate to act during similar crises in the future. Presumably they were also concerned about the declining popularity of the Bourguiba regime and the changing character of the conscripts and junior officers, whose views tend to reflect those of the population, not the establishment. []

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Issues that Trouble the Troops

Since the 1984 disturbances, [] the military rank and file increasingly is affected by the economic, political, and social problems troubling Tunisian society. []

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Economic Trends

[] junior and middle-grade officers are complaining about salaries, poor facilities, lack of equipment and training, a surplus of officers to enlisted men, and increasing isolation and signs of corruption on the part of senior officers. According to a source of the US Embassy in Tunis, some enlisted men and non-commissioned officers wrote letters to Defense Minister Baly last April expressing

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unhappiness over the lack of salary increases. Although they took no action, they threatened Defense Minister Baly and considered boycotting the 1 June Independence Day parade. [REDACTED]

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Disgruntlement in the military over money is going to grow, especially in view of the stagnation in defense spending associated with a cut in the overall government budget. The 1986 defense budget of \$295.9 million shows little change from the 1985 budget. Moreover, 80 percent of the defense procurement portion of the budget totalling \$156 million will be devoted to paying debts on loans from the US and other Western arms suppliers. [REDACTED]

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Foreign Relations

Crises with Libya and Israel during the latter half of 1985 heightened tension within the ranks. Libya's threats, and the subsequent Tunisian military alert between August and November, revealed the limitations of equipment and inadequacies of training, especially within the Air Force. The military establishment's conclusion that Libyan aggression could not be blunted and the undetected Israeli airstrike last October against the headquarters of the Palestine Liberation Organization, humiliated the officer corps and did their image no good with the public. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

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Social Factors

The cohesiveness of the officer corps is also being undermined by social developments. [REDACTED] differences of opinion over Algerian aid were split along generational lines. The more senior officers, who typically have had more contacts with Western counterparts than younger soldiers, were opposed to expanded cooperation with Algiers. Younger officers were either neutral or ambivalent about a relationship with Algeria.

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[REDACTED]

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Regionalism, too, has reduced combat effectiveness. [redacted]

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[redacted] December that soldiers redeployed to Southern Tunisia--increasingly the hotbed of religious and labor dissidence--during last year's alert had miserable working conditions and were considered outsiders by local Tunisians.

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Coup Rumors

There are signs that the country's malaise has affected the senior ranks as well. [redacted]

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[redacted] The evidence of political activity among senior Tunisian officers is sketchy, and there is no firm evidence that the maneuvering is related to political infighting among civilian leaders. Nonetheless, there appears to be a widespread impression among officers that politicking within the military is on the rise, and that officers may be lining up with civilian counterparts.

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In December Tunisia was full of rumors of military plotting and even an aborted coup attempt. [redacted]

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[redacted] About a dozen or so officers and non-commissioned personnel allegedly were involved, and the new Air Force chief was said to be aware of it but not a participant.

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These unconfirmed rumors, in our judgment, are fueled by the transfer or retirement under mysterious circumstances of four senior officers last November. Early that month, the government dissolved the military's training command, uncereemoniously dismissed its chief, and dispersed various schools to the different branches of the armed services. [redacted]

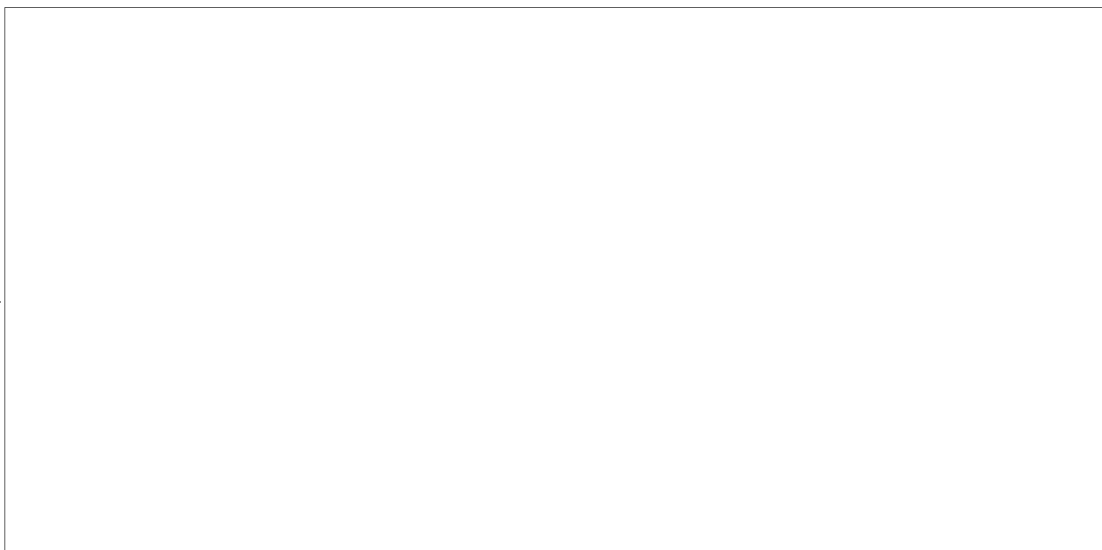
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The government's search for new sources of military assistance, in our view, could become another bone of contention between Mzali and officers. [REDACTED]

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the government intends to expand military contacts with China to explore alternative sources of weapons. The government may be considering Soviet arms as well. Although there is no evidence of discord over the pursuit of new foreign military relationships, we believe some senior officers may look with disfavor upon a turn toward the Soviets because of the risks of alienating traditional patrons in Paris and Washington. [REDACTED]

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The Military's Future Political Role

In our view, Tunisian officers are likely to become more active in politics in the coming years. Economic woes alone will encourage officers to raise their concerns more vocally with the government in order to protect the military's corporate interests. Even if officers are reluctant to act forcefully, the government's poor image and declining authority will make it imperative for Mzali to turn to the Army for support during public disturbances or violence resulting from a bitter succession struggle. [REDACTED]

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There already is some indication of the military's growing role and authority vis-a-vis civilian leaders. Most notable is the political rise of Colonel Zine Labidine Ben Ali, Minister Delegate to the Prime Minister. Ben Ali received his cabinet-level post in September during a minor shuffle of Ministers. His promotion represented a reward for effective service as Secretary of State for the Interior, head of the National Police, and Chief of the Directorate of National Security -- positions he retains. Even though Ben Ali does not command troops, he controls key police, security, and intelligence units. President Bourguiba and Mzali have come to rely on Ben Ali not only as the coordinator in charge

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of national security, but as a trouble-shooter on other domestic matters. We believe Ben Ali is well positioned to make a bid for power either in cooperation with Mzali, or against him. [REDACTED]

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Senior military leaders, or a cabal of junior officers, probably will be reluctant to intervene in the political process before President Bourguiba's death. Bourguiba's prestige is less today than a decade ago, but he is a formidable figure and a coup attempt against him would be a risky venture. Bourguiba's death and Mzali's succession to the post, however, would provide opportunities for intervention, especially if Mzali failed to consolidate power quickly or cannot get public opinion on his side. To be sure, any attempt at reform by the Prime Minister that would involve a relaxation of government restrictions on political parties could create greater domestic turmoil and thus have the same effect on the military. [REDACTED]

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Implications for the US

The Tunisian military establishment is well disposed toward the US, but its expanded influence in the political process would not necessarily mean a more favorable attitude toward Washington over the longer term. Senior officers grudgingly continue to support the US, even though they disagree with Washington's Middle East policies. Attitudes within the middle and junior officer corps, however, are changing--to the detriment of US and Western interests. Junior officers are not as enamored as their seniors with France and the US and probably favor policies that would place greater distance between Tunis and Paris and Washington. To the extent that senior officers have a voice in politics, they, too, will be compelled to take account of strong currents of anti-Americanism and Islamic fundamentalism in formulating positions on domestic and foreign policy. [REDACTED]

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	<u>OFFICERS</u>	NON COMMISSIONED <u>OFFICERS</u>	<u>ENLISTED</u>	<u>CONSCRIPTS</u>	<u>TOTAL (APPROX)</u>
Army	1,000	3,000	10,000	15-20,000	29-34,000
Navy	125		4,475		4,600
Air Force	200		3,300		3,500

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